Laboratory training and encounter groups

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This article reviews developments and concepts in the small group training field. It provides a brief historical perspective on group training and working definitions for some of the more frequently mentioned types of small groups: the T-group, encounter group, marathon, and therapy group. It also comments on research dealing with both the effects of group training and professional-ethical issues.

PARTICIPATION in some form of intensive group learning experience is becoming increasingly commonplace. In many schools, churches, business management groups, and social service agencies, involvement in a T-group, encounter group, or sensitivity training session is seen as a part of one's overall development. Such learning goals as getting to know oneself better, learning how one comes across to others, understanding more about human interaction, and getting a better feel for group operations are relevant to many vocational roles.

Two major factors seem to be accelerating the use of small face-to-face group experiences as learning vehicles: (a) the fast-changing, large, complex, and impersonal society in which we live; and (b) the increasing amount of organizational work-life that takes place in small face-to-face groups.

In regard to the former, Rogers (1968) states what he believes to be behind the rapid growth of the small group training phenomenon:

> . . . one of the most rapidly growing social phenomena in the United States is the spread of the intensive group experience. . . . Why? I believe it is because people—ordinary people—have discovered that it alleviates their loneliness and permits them to grow, to risk, to change. It brings persons into real relationships with persons [p. 269].

The second factor, equally compelling, is the increasing amount of the work in organizations that takes place in small, face-to-face groups (planning, decision-making, problem-solving, etc.). Organizations and individuals recognize the need for training methods that improve the functioning of these work groups. Another aspect of current organizational life is the growing regard for temporary structures—committees, project teams, task forces, conferences, consulting relationships, etc. (Bennis & Slater, 1968; Miles, 1964). It is becoming increasingly important for individuals to have the ability to move rapidly into team relationships in which there is mutual trust, adequate team spirit, and creative stimulation among members.

The counselor and personnel worker are often in a position to provide guid-

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ance and information to individuals who think they want to participate in a small group training experience. Also, an increasing number of counselors and personnel workers are attending small group training programs themselves in order to improve their group leadership skills. Because of this widespread participation, it is important to understand the differences among the various small group approaches—including their goals and methods. In this article, we will provide a brief historical perspective on small group training and working definitions for some of the more frequently mentioned types: the T-group, the encounter group, the marathon group, and the therapy group. We will also comment on some of the questions often raised regarding professional ethics in this field.

HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

Intensive small group training methods have their roots in the workshop method of the 1930's and 1940's, including the action-research methods of Kurt Lewin and the spontaneity training and role-playing methods of Moreno. The general approach did not begin with a primary focus on personality change or overcoming social and psychological isolation; rather, it started as a wedding between social action and scientific inquiry (Bunker, 1965). Its parent disciplines were adult education and the applied research interests of Lewin and some of his colleagues in social psychology—Ronald Lippitt, Leland Bradford, Kenneth Benne, and others. Their innovations were responsible for the first training workshops held, beginning in 1947, in isolated New England communities such as Bethel, Maine—"cultural islands" free from some of the usual situations in people's daily lives that pressure against change.

The National Training Laboratories (NTL), affiliated with the National Education Association, grew out of these efforts. It was found that participants learned and changed in their ability to deal with human relations problems, not only by listening to lectures and participating in role-playing but also by analyzing the here-and-now characteristics of their own conference groups. The social scientists discovered, partly by accident, that participants were very much interested in behavioral data that researchers who observed the groups collected about the group interaction. The analysis of this "process" data provided trainees a "laboratory" in which to deal more dynamically and personally with some of the human relationship issues they were studying.

Although NTL has played a major role in the evolution of group training, there have been other important influences. Group trainers with clinical and counseling backgrounds brought to NTL workshops and similar programs the skills and interests for dealing with personality variables within groups. Also, individuals with consulting and change agent skills (many of whom were members of the NTL consulting network) have applied their efforts to programs in which the goals are to effect change in the organization and the community.

In another direction, the existential-humanistic "human potential" approach has moved beyond the methods of traditional social science by employing various expressive, intrapsychic, and somatopsychologic techniques. Esalen Institute at Big Sur, California, has led in this development. (For a more comprehensive history of group training, see Benne [1964] and Bradford [1967].)

SOME DEFINITIONS

It is impossible to deal with small group training and the issues and problems surrounding it as a single, general phenomenon. Widely different, experience-based training approaches are currently being conducted, and to lump them together

confuses rather than simplifies. Further, the need to make decisions about the appropriateness of programs and qualifications of trainers requires the ability to differentiate between kinds of programs. It is even questionable whether the various types of small groups used for educational, training, or therapeutic purposes should be subsumed under one rubric; to do so implies more commonality than actually exists. Unfortunately, there are no generally accepted meanings for many of the terms often used. The following definitions are somewhat arbitrary but seem to mesh with the historical progression.

Sensitivity training is one of the first and most generic terms in the field. It originally referred to the small group training conducted by the National Training Laboratories. Currently, it is used by some to subsume all small group training approaches. However, most practitioners do not find it a useful term because it is frequently used so broadly (to include group therapy, for example) that it has lost its power to define. Also, training personnel whose methods are only peripherally related to the original sensitivity training approach have picked up the term and have applied it to their ventures.

We find the term *laboratory training* a more useful conceptualization; it is used to refer to an educational method that emphasizes experience-based learning activities. Participants are involved in a variety of experiences, usually including small group interaction, and their behavior provides the data for learning. Thus, laboratory training involves learning by doing. The subject matter of such programs deals with some aspect of human interaction, and the goal is to be more aware of and responsive to what is going on. A specific laboratory training program (human relations lab) may run from a few hours to two or more weeks and may contain a combination of elements designed to provide experiential learning. Although laboratory training is often used to refer to NTL-sponsored programs, we use it here to include experience-based learning approaches in general.

A basic element of most laboratories is the *T-group* (T for training). In the standard NTL-type of T-group, participants find themselves in a relatively unstructured environment in which their responsibility is to build out of their interaction a group that can help them meet their needs for support, feedback, learning, etc. The behaviors exhibited by members as they play out their roles provide the material for analysis and learning. Thus, T-group members have the opportunity of learning ways in which their behavior is seen by others in the group, the kinds of styles and roles they tend to take, their effectiveness in playing various kinds of roles, ways of being more sensitive to the feelings and behaviors of other group members, methods for understanding group behavior dynamics, etc. Time is usually provided for trainees to integrate what they have learned and plan to apply their new knowledge after the laboratory ends.

Some trainers within and outside the NTL network have evolved T-groups that provide a *personal growth* focus. Weschler, Massarik, and Tannenbaum (1962), who first described a laboratory with a "personal-interpersonal emphasis," provided the following explanation and rationale:

> Our version of sensitivity training increasingly concerns itself with strengthening of the individual in his desires to experience people and events more accurately, to a process of individual growth toward ever-increasing personal adequacy.

Encounter groups, as we define the term, refer to intensive small group experiences in which the emphasis is upon personal growth through expanding awareness, exploration of intrapsychic as well as interpersonal issues, and release of dysfunctional inhibitions. There is rela-

tively little focus on the group as a learning instrument; the trainer takes a more active and directive role; and physical interaction is utilized. Other modes of expression and sensory exploration such as dance, art, massage, and nudity are currently being tried as a part of the encounter experience.

Marathon groups are time-extended encounter groups that use the massed experience and the accompanying fatigue to break through participants' defenses. Many organizations have sprung up around the country to offer encounter groups and related continued education programs. They often call themselves *growth centers* and view their offerings as a part of the *human potential movement.*

Comparisons with Psychotherapy Groups

Since all of the above groups, in one way or another, deal with emotional experience, the self-concept, and impressions of the behavior of others, and since they stress honest communication, the question is sometimes raised, "How do these groups differ from therapy groups?"

Lubin and Eddy (1970) have summarized the differences stated by Frank (1964):

> Therapy group members are seen by themselves and others as having psychological problems and needing help, whereas T-Group members are seen as relatively well-functioning individuals interested in improving old skills and learning new ones; attitudes which therapy attempts to modify are usually concerned with persons who are close to the patient and therefore more central and resistant to change, whereas the T-Group attempts to modify more peripheral attitudes; the therapist is a much more central person than the trainer and dependency upon him continues to be strong throughout: and the T-Group, focusing less upon the individual, evokes more moderate emotional responses.

Also, the group-focused T-group emphasizes the here-and-now of group development and transactions among its members. By contrast, the therapy group sanctions the search for factors associated with conflicts and problems in the patient's past life experiences.

Another conceptualization of the current group psychotherapy scene would be helpful at this point. Parloff (1970) suggests that the diversity of objectives among group psychotherapists can be reduced by sorting them into two broad categories: "headshrinking" and "mind-expanding." "Headshrinking objectives" are similar to the ones mentioned by Scheidlinger (1967), i.e., amelioration of suffering and restoration or repair of functioning. "Mind-expanding objectives" include heightened positive affective states, self-actualization, and self-fulfillment.

When encounter groups, marathon groups, and T-groups with a personal-interpersonal focus are compared with therapy groups which have mind-expanding objectives, fewer differences can be specified. Major distinctions that remain are:

1. T-groups with a personal-interpersonal focus, encounter groups, and marathon groups are relatively brief in duration and are time-limited.
2. The T-group with a personal-interpersonal focus usually is embedded in a larger laboratory design.
3. In general, the T-group with a personal-interpersonal focus, the encounter group, and the marathon group define members as "participants" rather than patients.

The latter distinction holds true only for the T-group with a personal-interpersonal focus, as the NTL Institute discourages participation by people who have serious emotional problems; on the other hand, psychotherapists occasionally refer patients to encounter groups and marathon groups in order to move past therapeutic impasses.

LABORATORY TRAINING AND T-GROUPS

A participant in an NTL training laboratory will find the T-group a major com-

ponent of the design, in terms of both time and involvement. If the program is a week in length, he will spend perhaps 30 hours or more in intensive discussion with about 10 other people. The trainer assigned to the group probably will open with a statement somewhat similar to this:

> This group will meet for many hours and will serve as a kind of laboratory where each individual can increase his understanding of the forces which influence individual behavior and the performance of groups and organizations. The data for learning will be our own behavior, feelings, and reactions. We begin with no definite structure or organization, no agreed-upon procedures, and no specific agenda. It will be up to us to fill the vacuum created by the lack of these familiar elements and to study our group as we evolve. My role will be to help the group to learn from its own experiences, but not to act as a traditional chairman nor to suggest how we should organize, what our procedure should be, or exactly what our agenda will include. With these few comments, I think we are ready to begin in whatever way you feel will be most helpful . . . [Seashore, 1968, p. 1].

In programs with a personal-interpersonal or "personal growth" focus, the trainer might emphasize the goal of "getting to know and understand ourselves better." If the laboratory is designed to train a specific vocational group such as managers, teachers, or ministers, the opening remarks might acknowledge the relevance that group learnings have to work "back home."

After his initial remarks, the trainer usually recedes from active leadership, and the group must proceed without the usual guidance of formal authority. As the group seeks to establish goals and procedures that are acceptable and useful to its members, to develop ways of making necessary decisions, to establish norms that support its needs and goals, and to deal with the conflicts that ensue, it experiences in "real life" many of the major dilemmas in social interaction. If members can learn, with the trainer's assistance, to examine the interaction process as it unfolds, and if they can develop a trust level that will allow them to express the emotions associated with group

events, learning takes place. When the appropriate climate has developed, group members share feelings and perceptions ("feedback") regarding observed behavior in the group.

Theory and Rationale for the T-group

There is no single theory of T-groups. What is known or hypothesized is a combination of theories, some transplanted from other settings. There are, however, several major theoretical positions which most practitioners in the field find useful and which provide a theoretical base. These include Lewin's model of attitude change (unfreezing-changing-refreezing) (Schein & Bennis, 1965), experience-based learning as contrasted with the one-way lecture approach, and overcoming emotional barriers to social learning through trust development and feedback (Lubin & Eddy, 1970).

Effectiveness of T-groups

Do training laboratories emphasizing T-groups work? Do participants actually learn and change their real-life behavior? If so, in what ways and for how long?

In spite of the fact that there are no final answers to these questions, it is *not* true that outcome research on T-groups has been ignored. It seems safe to assert that there has been more research done on T-groups than on any other training approach. The authors of the American Psychiatric Association task force report, *Encounter Groups and Psychiatry* (1970), point out that:

> T-Groups, springing from the field of social psychology, have behind them a long tradition of research in group dynamics. No comparable body of knowledge has been generated by group therapy, a field notoriously deficient in any systematic research. Thus, what is presently known of the basic science of group psychotherapy stems almost entirely from social-psychological research with task groups and T-Groups; psychotherapy owes to the T-Group much of its systematic understanding of such factors as group development, group pressure, group cohesiveness, leadership, and group norms and values. Furthermore, T-Group research has elaborated a wealth of sophisticated research techniques and tools of which the group therapy field is now slowly availing itself [p. 19].

Bibliographies and analyses of research studies have been compiled by Stock (1964), House (1967), Campbell and Dunnette (1968), Durham, Gibb, and Knowles (1967), Buchanan (1965), and others. Undoubtedly there is disagreement about what the findings, taken together, mean. We offer the following generalizations. A majority of participants (about 60 percent) reports strong to fairly strong positive feelings about their T-group experiences and believe they have been helped to change and improve their behavior. A minority (20 to 30 percent) reports either mild positive or neutral response, and a smaller group (10 percent or less) feels negative about the experience. The question of what happens behaviorally after a T-group experience is a most difficult one to answer. One factor that has baffled research designers is that "desired" behavior outcomes cannot be specified for all participants. Each brings his own set of needs and interests which he pursues in his own way and which he may change or add to in the course of the program. In addition, comparable indices of performance-related behavior change in the work or family setting are extremely difficult to develop. A number of studies indicates that such changes do take place with significant frequency, although not all the studies are sufficiently well designed or controlled to satisfy the rigorous researcher completely.

One point seems fairly clear, however. Laboratory learnings are more likely to persist and to contribute to improvements in performance when they are supported and reinforced in the back-home situation. Employees from firms that support the general norms of laboratory training through organization development programs, or married couples who have both had successful T-group experi-

ences, are most likely the ones who find lasting benefits.

Future trends in laboratory training will probably proceed in the direction of greater linkages between training and application. Laboratories will be augmented by further training experiences which deal with the real people, processes, and problems back home. Skills, norms, and approaches to problem-solving learned in training laboratories will be put into practice through programs at community or organizational levels.

ENCOUNTER GROUPS

The term *encounter group* has been used generically by some writers to refer to any group, regardless of methodology or objectives, that emphasizes intensive interaction, honest communication, and self-revelation. In this sense, all the groups described in this article can be called encounter groups. To use the term in this way, however, is to invite considerable conceptual confusion at a time when clarity is urgently needed. Part of the problem arises from the dearth of definitions about encounter groups. The literature in this area is mainly of an anecdotal nature; there has been no systematic attempt to specify methods, processes, or outcomes.

Burton (1969) states that "encounter groups have been so busy being expressive that they have had little time to look to their theories" (p. ix). After studying many different kinds of encounter groups, Lieberman, Yalom, and Miles (1970, in press) conclude that "our analysis to date strongly suggests that a view of encounter groups as a uniform activity is incorrect. It thus appears that the generic title encounter groups covers a wide range of operations by leaders that lead to many kinds of group experiences, and perhaps to many types of learnings."

Despite the lack of stated theory and the diversity of leader styles, various types of encounter groups seem to share a general view of man that grows out of the existentialist-humanist tradition: "Encounter group practitioners believe that man functions at a small fraction of his potential and that methods which remove blockages and release this potential enable him to integrate at substantially higher levels of functioning" (Lubin & Eddy, 1970). Most encounter group leaders would agree with this statement by Gibb and Gibb (1968):

> People can grow. Man's potential for growth is vast and, as yet, relatively unexplored. In his inner depth—in his *essential* reality—man is capable of giving and receiving warmth, love, and trust. He is moving toward interdependence and confrontation. Growth is a kind of freeing of this inner self of these internal processes—an emergence and fulfillment of an unguessed inner potential. Growth is a process of fulfilling, realizing, emerging, and becoming [p. 101].

Encountering methods are designed to facilitate the freeing of growth processes in a rapid manner and to circumvent defenses. Some of the methods used by various leaders are deepening of sensory awareness, muscular tension and relaxation, guided fantasy, nonverbal games, physical contact, meditation, symbolic movement, etc. Any attempt to list the methods used will of necessity be incomplete because encounter group leaders are continuously trying out new methods.

In general, cognitive activity or conceptualization of experience in encounter groups is devalued. Departures from "experience" generally are viewed as intellectual defensive maneuvers. The major exception is reported by Ellis (1969) who champions both affect and cognition.

The encounter group leader occupies a very central position in the group's activities and experience. The leader's situation bears many resemblances to that of the psychodrama director, alternately suggesting activities, concentrating his and the group's attention on various members (Haigh, 1968), regulating the time spent in various activities, etc.

Encounter groups resemble the mind-expanding (Parloff, 1970) forms of group therapy in the depth and extent of personal change that is sought, the pressure toward total self-disclosure, and the leader's centrality. Many people attend encounter groups expecting to achieve peak experiences (Maslow, 1962); these expectations are aroused by promotional material and lay literature.

Research on the effectiveness of encounter groups is almost totally nonexistent. This lack is due only partly to the newness of the field; until very recently many practitioners took the position that the outcome of encounter groups was self-evident and did not need formal evaluation. Bach (1967, 1968a) reports two studies on his marathon groups, but the reports neither compare the effectiveness of the marathon technique against other techniques nor do they contain comparison with nontreated controls. Also, duration of effect is not studied. Even though data were collected at the end of the group experience, these seem to be process rather than outcome studies. Elsewhere, Bach (1968b) has indicated that he is planning long-term follow-ups on group members. Also, the previously cited study by Lieberman et al. should provide much needed data on the effectiveness of the various encounter group methods.

PROFESSIONAL AND ETHICAL ISSUES

During its earlier years, the laboratory training field did not encounter many problems related to maintaining standards for trainer preparation and behavior. Summer internship programs followed by co-training assignments provided an avenue of induction for the modest number of newcomers to the field. Most entered with doctorates in applied psychology or education. This situation has changed dramatically. It is no overstatement to assert that the situation regarding standards for training is in complete disarray.

No one knows how many T-groups, encounter groups, marathons, therapy groups for normals, and other intensive group experiences are held weekly in the United States. Certainly the figure runs into hundreds. Some are conducted by qualified scientists who have acquired group training skills in special programs provided by NTL, universities, or other comparable organizations. Others are being conducted by behavioral scientists, including psychiatrists, clinical psychologists, counselors, and others without special training who assume that their therapeutic skills are sufficient. And many are being conducted by individuals whose background is peripheral to or outside behavioral science. In the eyes of many, laboratory training is no longer "owned" by professionals. T-groups and encounter groups—perhaps by slightly different names—are offered by a wide variety of individuals. Undoubtedly some of the "amateur" group trainers are competent and ethical and help provide participants in their groups a worthwhile experience. Others may not be competent and in conducting groups may be satisfying primarily their own needs for control, recognition, affection, etc., rather than the learning needs of participants.

One problem is that techniques of group training, like therapy, appear deceptively simple and easy to reproduce. The T-group trainer remains silent much of the time—injecting only an occasional observation or comment. Furthermore, superficial observation might suggest that the encounter group leader requires only an easily memorized catalogue of behavioral interventions. Cookbook-type manuals of exercises and encounter tapes and films have helped provide group leaders, including the marginally qualified ones, with additional tools.

The NTL Institute has never accredited or certified trainers. In granting Fellow or Associate status to behavioral scientists, it has included them in its "network" of trainers and change agents who

are utilized in NTL laboratories and other programs. A new category, "Professional Membership," indicates demonstrated beginning competence but does not imply any commitment for use on the part of NTL. Recently, the matter of standards and trainer qualifications has come under increasing discussion.

As a partial measure to exert some control over training quality, the NTL Institute has developed and ratified a policy manual defining *Standards for the Use of the Laboratory Method in NTL Institute Programs* (NTL Institute for Applied Behavioral Science, 1969). It sets forth the organization's position on such matters as trainer qualifications, participant selection, goals of training, professional ethics and values, and applications of laboratory learnings. The thrust of the policy statement is in the direction of more rigorous standards. It endorses the American Psychological Association's ethical standards, sets forth a comprehensive list of requisite skills, experiences, and ethics for its trainer members, and specifically rejects the notion that participation in one or more "basic" laboratory experiences constitutes preparation to do training.[1]

NEGATIVE EFFECTS OF TRAINING

A common criticism of laboratory training is that it is potentially psychologically harmful. Stories about someone who "cracked up" while attending a laboratory program are not uncommon, and the assumption is that the T-group experience was the cause of the problem. A few large sample studies and several anecdotal reports are available. NTL Institute records indicate that of 14,200 individuals who participated in its summer human relations programs and industrial training programs between 1947 and 1968, the experience was stressful enough for 33 (.2 percent) to require them to leave the program prior to its completion. Almost all of these individuals had a history of prior disturbances (*NTL Institute News and Reports,* 1969). The YMCA located four individuals who had "negative experiences" out of approximately 1,200 participants in its laboratory programs (.3 percent) (Batchelder & Hardy, 1968). Three of the four, upon follow-up, seem to have gained ultimately from the disruptive experience.

The majority of studies reports the incidence of difficulty at between .2 and .5 percent, although some have higher proportions of negative results reported. Most of these studies deal with only one or two groups, and many with situations that differ from the traditional one- or two-week "stranger" laboratory led by professionals, i.e., they refer to weekend encounter marathons, training programs for psychiatric residents, classroom-type settings, leaderless groups, etc. A summarization of the data seems to indicate that laboratory training should *not* be viewed as a benign and foolproof method. In residential programs run by professionals where purposes are advertised as clearly educational rather than therapeutic, the incidence of difficulty seems quite low. On the other hand, in situations in which there is doubt about the qualifications of the trainer, the expectations of the clients, the intensity and duration of the program, and other situational pressures, there may be reason for caution.

CONCLUSION

The small group training field finds itself in a curious paradox. Its value system advocates an open, accepting, nonjudgmental approach. Yet it is aware of the need to protect the public and itself by seeing to the competence and appropriateness of training offered. The challenge will be to find ways of setting and

[1] A copy of the Standards Manual may be obtained by writing the NTL Institute, 1201 16th Street, N.W., Washington, D.C. 20036.

maintaining viable standards and of informing the public about them, without establishing exclusive and restrictive systems.

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COMMENT by James D. Beck

To provide working definitions for the more frequently mentioned types of small groups is a needed and timely task. One need only talk to a neighbor or colleague, attend a movie, or watch television to recognize the rapidly growing awareness of group experience and the accompanying confusion of terms and processes. The trend has obviously contributed to the indiscriminate use of groups and the need for clarifying the terminology.

Reacting to these conditions, Eddy and Lubin raise important questions and make assumptions that permit them to illustrate the issue with apparent insight and understanding. They engage the subject in a germane and creative fashion, for instance, by taking the position that to place the various types of small groups under one rubric implies more commonality than actually exists.

Their historical overview of the inception and development of current group training processes provides a useful contextual focus and serves as a rationale for the working definitions that are enmeshed in the historical progression. Such an approach, however, stirs me to ambivalence. I suspect that the details obscure the authors' intent, but, on the other hand, the details may have a utilitarian value that exceeds the merits of simple, explicit definitions.

The authors' assertion that the most generic term *sensitivity training* has "lost its power to define" and their substitution of *laboratory training* as the acceptable general term is a skillful maneuver. Eliminating this grossly abused label enables them to avoid a perpetual morass, provides an operational construct—laboratory training—and facilitates the goal of differentiating group terminology.

Because I recognize the difficulties in clarifying referent labels of inherently overlapping activities, I feel that the authors' efforts represent valuable input. However, in addition to their intralaboratory distinctions, I believe that a similar comparison of laboratory-based experiences with group procedures such as group guidance might have potentiated their efforts to make real differentiations rather than artificial ones. Furthermore, the inclusion of clear-cut statements of implications for practitioners would have helped the authors achieve their goals.

In summary, although I feel that the article's organizational style of presentation sometimes makes it difficult to follow, it does provide a useful approach in clarifying terminology, which is without doubt the most critical need in the area of laboratory training.

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